

Mr. Chair and Committee Members, Garla Boland, (G A R L A B O L A N D

spell name out) Montana PTA Executive Director. I stand before you today to speak on behalf of Senate Bill 123 regarding funding for full-time kindergarten.

Montana PTA is the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the state of Montana. We represent over 7,000 parents and child advocates in local PTA units spread across all corners of our vast state from Wolf Point to Darby and in between. We are a strictly non-partisan organization whose sole purpose is to promote the welfare of children and youth in schools.

The vision statement for Montana PTA is: "Montanan's working together for the future well-being of all children." / Vision is what is needed to continue to progress into the future when it comes to education, and full-time kindergarten is that progression into the future.

A growing body of research confirms that the first years of life are critical regarding cognitive, social, and emotional development. And, the first years of education are critical regarding the future success of a child's education. Studies show that full-time kindergarten helps close achievement gaps between children, especially those in low-income or minority homes. Children who attend full-time kindergarten are *significantly* more likely to purchase a home during their lifetime than students who attend half-time kindergarten or no kindergarten at all. Children who attend full-time kindergarten need less special education services, have lower retention rates, and have lower drop-out rates than those who don't attend full-time kindergarten.

Experts agree that if students are not reading at their grade level by the third grade, then they will not catch up – unless a great deal ^{of} time and money is spent on the rest of their education. The most cost effective way to ensure all students will have adequate reading skills when they graduate from high school is to make sure ~~any~~

problems are discovered early and corrected early. The best place to start this is in kindergarten, but corrective measures take more time than is available in a half-time kindergarten day.

During my tenure as ~~the~~ Montana PTA Executive Director, I have had many occasions to visit with parents. The Great Falls School District has implemented full-time kindergarten. The parents that I have talked with expound the benefits and successes of their children from full-time kindergarten. As parents – we are often the only advocate for our children. This plan still allows parents to make the decision on whether or not to send their child to full-time kindergarten. PTA allows us to speak for every child – with one voice – representing parents and children who may not have the courage to speak out in support of this bill. So today, I am here speaking on their behalf because not all of our 7000 members were able to attend.

Full-time kindergarten will save taxpayers money in the long run. Students who attend full-time kindergarten have significantly higher income levels, are less likely to be arrested, and less likely to need social services.

However, despite all of the benefits of full-time kindergarten, I am not here to ask you to mandate that it be required to be implemented across the state. Like most of the Representatives on this committee and in the Montana House, Montana PTA strongly supports local control of schools and the ability of each local school district to make the decision regarding full-time kindergarten that is best for their individual school district. We do ask that schools districts that decide to implement full-time kindergarten receive full-time funding for those students and the services provided to them by the school district. Please vote yes on Senate Bill 123. Thank you for your time.

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